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How Soviets treat their turncoats

In 1983, two young Soviet soldiers defected to the West from the army in Afghanistan. Last December we wrote about the decision of one of those defectors, Nikolai Ryzhov, 20, after 18 months of freedom, to return home.

Perhaps suffering from culture shock and encouraged by reports in the press that two earlier defectors from the Soviet army had returned to the Soviet Union, where they were warmly received by the government, young Nikolai was hopeful that his superiors would dismiss his defection as merely a young man's folly. That hope was dashed soon after his return, when a Soviet military court found Nikolai guilty of crimes against the state and sentenced him to 15 years in prison and five years in exile.

Comparatively speaking, the Soviet government did exhibit leniency toward Mr. Ryzhov, for his two compatriots who had returned to Mother Russia earlier and who had been warmly received in public by their government, had summarily and very discreetly been put to death.

Allegations have been made recently by another Soviet defector from Afghanistan, Alexander Voronov, and others who were close to young Nikolai during his last few days in this country, that Nikolai's decision to return home was not as voluntary as originally perceived.

It is their position that Nikolai's return was the result of constant pressure exerted on him by a certain interest group in this country. This constant harassment resulted in Nikolai's changing residences 11 times and jobs seven times in a year. But wherever he went, his persecutors allegedly sought him out — discouraging him in his efforts to speak out on college campuses and on Capitol Hill about what was going on in Afghanistan. Nikolai's fellow deserter, Alexander Voronov, also was plagued by these incessant efforts to ensure silence and return to the Soviet Union.

A tape was made of one of the telephone conversations directed at Alexander in which the speaker identified himself as a representative of the U.S. State Department, but, despite repeated efforts to get him to give his name, he never did. Mr. Voronov and Resistance International, an organization dedicated to exposing the Soviet system for what it is, have asked that an investigation be initiated to ascertain who is behind the harassment campaign.

Obviously, this campaign has not been inspired by our own State Department. It is a quite different State Department today from the one that dealt with another Soviet refugee in 1970 when representatives from the United States and the U.S.S.R. met at sea, just off Martha's Vineyard, to discuss fishing rights between the two nations. A Soviet vessel tied up alongside a U.S. Coast Guard cutter and the talks began. Soon afterward, a Soviet sailor on board the Russian ship signaled his intention to defect.

The U.S. Coast Guard commander radioed his base commander to obtain guidance and supposedly was informed — after conferences with State Department representatives — not to assist the sailor in any way in his effort to escape, as they wanted no disruption of the talks. The Soviet seaman, Simas Kudirka, then proceeded to jump from his ship onto the deck of the U.S. Coast Guard vessel.

The Soviets demanded his immediate return and the Coast Guard commander, based on guidance from higher authority, permitted the Soviets to board the American vessel and take Mr. Kudirka back. The Soviets proceeded to beat the sailor severely while still on board the U.S. ship, its American crew helpless to assist in any manner.

We would suggest, however, that the current harassment campaign aimed at Nikolai, and now at Alexander, is one that is controlled by the KGB. Such campaigns are commonly pursued by totalitarian governments in an effort to silence criticism abroad.

Included in their arsenal of potential weapons are death squads, which seek to accomplish by assassination what cannot be accomplished by fear and intimidation. While some countries, such as Libya, openly acknowledge the existence of such squads, the Soviet government is much more discreet and sophisticated in its employment of this weapon. Such discretion and sophistication through the use of a surrogate make it difficult to lay responsibility for such actions directly at the Kremlin door. This discretion and sophistication have led on more than one occasion to the deaths in the Free World, under mysterious circumstances, of Soviet defectors who were assuming too high a profile in their attacks against the Soviet Union.

Such was the fate of Sergei Kourdikov, a promising young man, tagged early by the KGB as a national leader. As such, he was asked to organize and lead a special gang of "toughs" in terrorist raids in the Soviet Union against Christian "believers" who met secretly to worship in violation of Soviet doctrine. Sergei led more than 100 such raids against Christians. However, as his involvement continued, he could not help but admire the commitment of his victims to continuing to practice their beliefs.

Sergei soon became disillusioned with the Soviet system and, in a dramatic escape that made headlines throughout the West, jumped from a Soviet vessel

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into the icy waters off Canada during a raging storm to reach freedom. Shortly after making his way to the United States, Sergei began speaking out against the Soviet Union. On occasion he was approached by foreign agents who cautioned him to remain silent. On Jan. 1, 1973, just before he was scheduled to testify on Capitol Hill, Sergei was found in a motel room — killed by a gunshot.

At a time when the United States is experiencing the trauma of the possible treason of U.S. Navy personnel, it is worth reflecting that Soviet citizens who are inclined to cooperate with the United States have a much more difficult problem. It is often hard for them to find a U.S. government official willing to listen. The defectors who do, sometimes find themselves sentenced to death by the Soviet totalitarian system without the benefit of trial.

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